Improving English Vocabulary as Second Language Learners at the University of Kelaniya

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භාෂාවක අංග අතරින් එහි වාක්කෝෂයට වැදගත් ස්ථානයක් හිමි වේ. භාෂාව නිවැරැදි ව හසුරුවා පැහැදිලි ව අදහස් ප්‍රකාශ කිරීම සඳහා ද එය අත්‍යවශ්‍ය සාධකයකි. මේ අධ්‍යයනය ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව දෙ වැනි භාෂාවක් ලෙස හදාරන කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයීය විද්‍යාර්ථීන් තම වාග්කෝෂය පුළුල් කරගැනීමට භාවිත කරන ක්‍රම පිළිබඳ විග්‍රහයකි. ඒ ක්‍රමවල එලදායීතාව හා ඒ අතරින් වඩාත් ජනප්‍රිය ක්‍රමය කුමක් ද යි මෙහි දී විමසනු ලැබේ. විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයේ ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂා ඉගැන්වීමේ ඒකකය විසින් මෙහෙයවනු ලබන විෂය ඒකක හදාරන විද්‍යාර්ථීන් සියයක් සඳහා යොමු කරන ලද ප්‍රශ්නාවලියකින් ගොනුකරගත් දත්ත ඒ සඳහා යොදා ගන්නා ලදි. එහි දී සනාථ වූයේ නවීන අන්තර්ජාල ක්‍රියාකාරකම් භාවිතයෙන් වාක්කෝෂය පුළුල් කරගැනීම පිළිබඳ ඔවුන්ගේ අවධානය යොමු වී නොමැති බව යි.

Background

Although a prominent position was given to Greek and Latin Languages and learning its vocabulary in the second century BC, English became more popular later as it was used widely in the world as the common language for communication purposes and improving its vocabulary to fulfill the needs of proper communication process, was given a prominent place. Many attempts were made to standardise English vocabulary throughout the world and as a result of that attempt English Dictionaries were produced. According to Schmitt (2000), 'A Table Alphabetical', published in 1604, by Robert Cawdrey was the first dictionary to study vocabulary in English language and then Samuel Johnson brought out his 'Dictionary of the English Language' in 1755, which soon became the standard reference.

Many strategies and methods are introduced to improve English vocabulary and improving vocabulary by reading, by using a dictionary, by reading journals and by listening to native speakers' conversations and by engaging in conversations are recommended as some of the most effective methods of enhancing English vocabulary. Among them there is a wide ranging inventory of vocabulary improving methods developed by Schmitt (1997). As he states, if learners don't know a word they must discover its meaning by guessing based on their structural knowledge of language or they must guess it from its context. He further declares that the context should be taken to mean more than just textual context, however since contextual clues can come from a variety of sources. These methods of guessing the meaning from the learners' structural knowledge of the language or guessing its meaning from context are introduced as the "Determination Strategy" (DET) (Schmitt's 1997). The second method is introduced as "Social Strategy" (SOC) where the learner has to

ask from someone who knows the language well; for an example learners can ask form their English trenchers/ lecturers for the translation and its synonyms as well as a definition by the paraphrase. Schmitt's (1997) third suggestion is "Discovery Strategy" (DIS), which allows the learners to use a dictionary to understand the meaning of a new word.

Apart from the above mentioned main three methods he further declares the success of using the "Memory Strategy" (MEM) and "Cognitive Strategy" (COG), which allow learners to think their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with new words. Many learners use 'Word lists' to improve their English vocabulary and Schmitt (1995) suggests that it could be done with a vocabulary note book which includes new words and their translations.

The first strategy that language learners use to improve their vocabulary is 'Reading'. The more the reader reads, specially novels, literary work as well as magazines and newspapers, the more they will be able to improve their vocabulary and expose to many new words. They must also attempt to derive meaning from the context of the sentence as well as from looking up the definition in a dictionary. It is very important to read essays and even blogs on various subjects and to note down the unknown words that one comes across, specially 'Technical Terms' for checking later. The second strategy is using a 'Dictionary', the learners are free to use any version they prefer. When the learner comes across a new word it is very important to check in the dictionary to learn both its pronunciation and its meaning. It is also better to find similar words, phrases and opposites of the new words.

The third popular strategy is keeping a running 'list' of new words that one discovers and slowly building them into everyday

vocabulary of the learner. Many learners make a list of important verbs and nouns and that helps them in many ways. Modern technologies such as using internet to improve English vocabulary has become a popular strategy, which is used frequently among the language learners as they can find many 'word games' to improve their vocabulary.

These games challenge the learner and help them to discover new meanings and expressions, new words become a 'fun tool' in the quest for expanding the learner's vocabulary and there are 'cross word puzzles', 'word jumble puzzles' as vocabulary improving games. Many language learners have proved that they have improved their English Vocabulary by 'engaging them in conversation' and this strategy implies that simply talking with other people helps the learner to discover new words. It is required to remember or note down the new words that learners hear in conversations and add new words to the learners' vocabulary.

The above mentioned strategies are used frequently by English language learners to improve their vocabulary and it is very important to practice them regularly to become a fluent user in English vocabulary by using them regularly, writing them regularly and engaging them in their conversations regularly.

Research Questions

• What are the methods used by the ESL Learners at the University of Kelaniya to improve English Vocabulary?
• What is the frequency of using these methods to enhance their vocabulary?
• Are these methods effective?
• What are the practical problems of the learners in using these methods?

Methodology

This study examines the methods, used by the undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya, to improve English vocabulary. The frequency of using these methods are also examined with the practical problems of using them in the ESL classrooms at the University level to identify the effectiveness of using these methods to improve the vocabulary of ESL students. The participants were also given an opportunity to introduce their suggestions and solutions for their practical issues. A questionnaire was prepared to distribute among hundred students who follow English Course Units offered by the English Language Teaching Unit of the University of Kelaniya. Hundred Undergraduates, who learn English as a second language at the University of Kelaniya were selected to participate this research study. They were selected randomly and were given a questionnaire to be filled with their own methods of improving English vocabulary as its Second Language Learners.

These participants represented the Faculties of Social Sciences, Humanities, Science and Commerce and Management of the University of Kelaniya and they were the Undergraduates who were following the Course Units of 'English for Social Sciences and Humanities', 'English for Physical Sciences', 'English for Business Communication', 'English for the students of English Department' and 'Certificate Course in English', offered by the English Language Teaching Unit of the University of Kelaniya in their first, second and third academic years of Bachelor's Degree Programme. There are various strategies which have been used as methods of improving English Vocabulary and only fifteen strategies are adopted in this questionnaire. The prepared questionnaires were distributed to Undergraduates during their lecture times and they

were asked to complete the questionnaires in the lecture room to be collected at the same times. They were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaires through their own experiences of using the presented methods of improving vocabulary in their lessons practically and they were asked to write down the issues they have faced when they were using the given methods.

Fifteen methods which are introduced to improve English Vocabulary were mentioned in the distributed Questionnaire and the participants were given an opportunity to select how often they use those methods to improve their English Vocabulary. The given Methods are listed below;

1. "I use a dictionary to learn new English words"

2. "I write new English words in a book and study them"

3. "I write definitions of new words in a separate book"

4. "I guess the meanings of new words with other words in the text"

5. "I ask the lecturer to translate English words to Sinhala/Tamil"

6. "I ask the meanings of the new words from the classmates"

7. "I read books, newspapers and learn new words"

8. "I study Vocabulary lists"

9. "I listen to native speakers and talk with them"

10. "I learn new words from films"

12. "I learn words about the culture of English speaking countries"

13. "I make example sentences of new words to memorise them"

14. "I study spellings"

15. "I practice new words over and over again"

16. "I use online activities and online Vocabulary tests"

Every participant had to select how often they use these methods to improve their English Vocabulary and they had to indicate the frequency by ticking one of the three options naming;

1.NEVER   2.SOMETIMES   3.ALWAYS

Data Analysis

All the participants had selected one of the given options to indicate the frequency of using the given methods in their day to day life and the below indicated table summarises their frequency of using these methods.

According to this table the majority of the participants use the given methods of improving vocabulary only sometimes in their studies and some methods they never use in their learning procedures to improve the knowledge of English vocabulary.
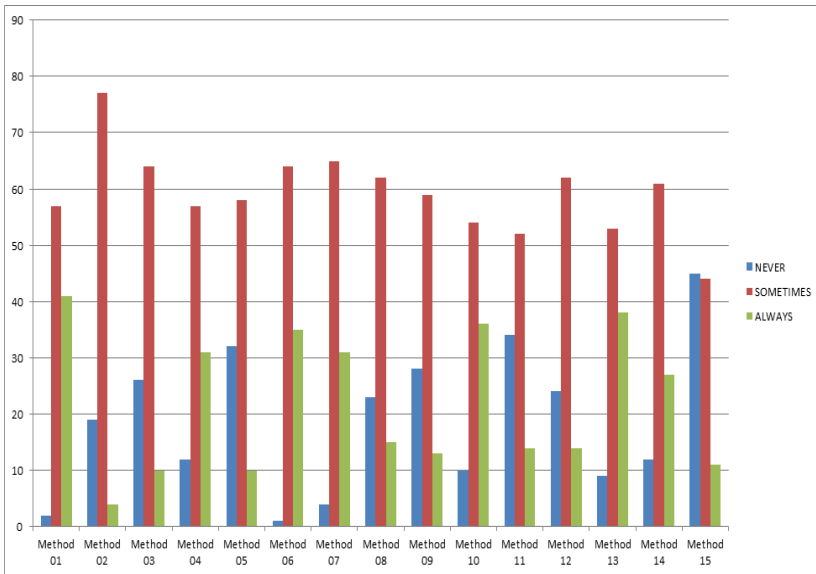
According to the results of this table, it is proved that the most popular methods from the given methods are using a Dictionary to learn new English words as it is the method which is 'Always' used by the majority of the participants.Though there are many methods to improve English vocabulary and though the participants had introduced many methods to improve English vocabulary, it is also important to seek out whether these methods are effective or not effective in their learning processes. Therefore the participants were given a question to give their opinion on whether those methods had helped them to improve their English vocabulary. The result is;99% of the participants had agreed that these methods are helpful and only one of the participated undergraduates had mentioned that these methods are not helpful to improve their English vocabulary in a proper way.

The participants were given an opportunity to expose the problem that they face when using these methods in the distributed Questionnaire and the problems such as new words cannot be pronounced in their proper way, difficult words are always hard to be remembered, the feeling of fear and shyness to speak in public, some words are not spelled according to their pronunciation, the basic meaning of the word cannot be used in all the contexts, sometimes the opportunity to refer to a dictionary is limited as there are limited resources, the difficulty of understanding the meanings of colloquial expressions as they are not mentioned in the Standard Language, some words and expressions used in the movies, dramas, and cartoons cannot be found in dictionaries, the less awareness about the word practicing activities in the internet and the difficulties in using English- English dictionaries as it is complicated to understand the definition given in English were indicted in the questionnaire.

Conclusion and Discussion

When considering the results of the research it is proved that Undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya follow many methods to improve their vocabulary, specially they follow most of the given methods in the Questionnaire and they also follow their own methods such as talking to friends in English and talking to themselves in English as an aid to think in English to use more words in their speaking. Using a dictionary, writing new English words and memorizing them, guessing meanings along with other words, listening to movies and songs, getting peer-supports, talking to native speakers, making sentences with new words, studying spellings were highlighted as the most popular methods of improving English vocabulary and the study proved that many learners are not exposed to online activities or games which improve their vocabulary with modern technologies. The problem of difficulties in using the basic or the surface meaning of a word in different contexts was figured out as the major problem and being familiar with all forms of a new word was suggested to enhance their vocabulary in order to use them with their correct contextual meanings.

Among the presented fifteen methods of improving English vocabulary, the Undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya prefer to use the method of 'using a dictionary to learn new English words', 'learning new words from films' and 'studying spellings'. These methods can be categorised as the most popular methods of them as the majority of the participants had selected the option 'always' for these three methods to indicate the frequency of using these methods. Among these popular methods referring to a dictionary is the mostly used method as it is fast and easy to refer to a dictionary whenever they find a difficult word. According to the results of the research that method is 'always' used by 41 of the participants,

which is the highest percentage of using a method to practice and learn new English words, therefore the method of 'using a dictionary to learn new English words' can be introduced as the most popular method of the Undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya.

According to Nation (1990) there are two kinds of a word form, namely 'written form' and the 'spoken form'. The written form of a word refers to the spelling and the spoken form means sound or pronunciation. If a Second Language Learner becomes a master of a particular language he or she should improve these two forms of a word as it has its own value in different contextual backgrounds. For example the past tense of the verb, 'read' is written as 'read' but it is pronounced as 'red' and the Second Language Learner should acknowledge these differences in written form and the spoken form of a particular word.

As Schmitt (2000) defines; a word has a "fixed" meaning, which is considered to be the "basic meaning" or the word and it also has a "fuzzy" meaning, which is considered as its "cultural" meaning or "contextual" meaning. He depicts the meaning of the word "skinny" as an example; indicating that its "fixed meaning" is "slim" in describing a beautiful figure although its "fuzzy" meaning is "unhealthy" of "unattractive" in describing an old woman. Therefore when a Second Language Learner defines the word 'vocabulary', it is important to pay attention to these two concepts of a word form.

Knowing a word implies knowing many things about the word, but Second Language Learners are only acknowledged about its dictionary meaning and to improve their vocabulary knowledge they should investigate the contextual meaning or the various connotations of that particular word. Therefore, improving English

vocabulary involves the improvement of acknowledging both dictionary meaning and its connotations. It is very important to pay attention to these aspects of a word when learners improve their English vocabulary as Second Language Learners.

The solution for the problems of pronouncing the new words properly can be suggested as listening to the pronunciation of the native speakers. It is better to use online facilities where they provide the opportunity to listen to the native speakers' pronunciations. It is important to use difficult new words frequently in speaking and writing as a practice to remember the word and its spellings and the feeling of fear and shyness can be reduced by speaking with friends and also with family members before talking in public.

It is important to read many books, newspapers and articles to get a clear idea about the proper usage of same words in different contexts; there are books written specially to explain the different usage of words and the learners can be advised to refer to these explanations. It is also suggested to use internet facilities where the learner can get a good support to practice words in an interesting way rather than memorizing the spellings of the words. There are many activities in the internet where the learners can get access to many interesting word games to practice the spellings of new words. These solutions can be used by the learners to minimise the problems that they face when enhancing their English vocabulary in learning it as a Second Language.

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